

February 26, 2023

Co-Chair Osten, Co-Chair Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee of the Connecticut General Assembly –

I am grateful to submit testimony in support of increased funding for Connecticut's Flagship Producing Theatres (CFPT).

I am the Interim Managing Director of Westport Country Playhouse, located in Westport, CT. We are a 93 year old institution, and one among the six flagship producing theatres across Connecticut, also including Long Wharf Theatre, Hartford Stage, Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, Goodspeed Musicals, and Yale Repertory Theatre, representing a collective \$46.5 million annual investment in our State's economy. We cumulatively employ thousands of local residents, provide free and low-cost education programs for K-12 students, and produce live theatrical productions that strengthen tourism and spending at local restaurants, hotels, and shops. Our scenery and costumes are constructed with locally sourced materials, including lumber, fabric, and other goods.

Cultural organizations producing live performances were significantly impacted by COVID-19; we were the first to close and the last to reopen. From 2020 until now, we've lost \$3,221,877 of our annual income—in ticket sales and contributions. Single ticket sales were down 55% from pre-pandemic, and almost 80,000 audience members have not come back to the theater. Most pandemic-related funding programs sunset in June 2022, even though ticketing income has not returned at full pace. This causes a greater reliance on contributed income, which is challenged by donors feeling the pinch of inflationary prices on everyday items and the financial market's negative impact on personal finances. We are in dire need of funding to serve as a short-term bridge while we do the work of rebuilding our audience's theatre going habits post-pandemic, thus our recent request for a \$6 million lifeline. However, to be sustainable beyond the short term will require reliable and significant annual funding.

Connecticut Flagship Producing Theatres are grateful recipients of line item funding from the State of Connecticut, awarded to our organizations since 2013. Funding has declined since the State's first allocation, starting at \$83,333 per theatre (a total of \$500,000) to \$43,325 per company (a total of \$259,950) today. During the pandemic, we received additional allocations of \$129,975 and \$86,650 in FY2022 and FY2023, respectively; when combined with line item funding, this meaningfully represents two to three salaried positions, and increased investments in audience development and educational programs. This additional funding sunsets in June 2023, even as our income continues to be significantly below pre-pandemic levels. The proposed allocation from the State for FY2024-25 represents just 0.8% of Westport Country Playhouse's FY2023 operating expenses.

Strengthening the State's financial support of the arts strengthens the Connecticut's economy. According to the Americans for the Arts' *Arts and Economic Prosperity 5* study, for every dollar spent on the arts, \$7 comes back to Connecticut's government. In 2020, Connecticut's arts and

culture sector contributed \$8.9 billion to our State's economy, 3.2% of our GDP and a greater return than construction or transportation. Annually, pre-pandemic, our theatres employed a Connecticut workforce and spent approximately \$27.6 million in taxable payrolls; we purchased local materials in excess of \$8.8 million; we spent over \$2.5 million on local printing and advertising and over \$1.3 million on local housing, hotel nights and apartment rentals, for guest artists. Our theatres contribute a substantial value to the quality of life in our neighborhoods, making Connecticut cities and towns attractive destinations to visit, work, and live. At a time when governments at all levels are making tough budget choices, there is demonstrated proof that support for the arts does not come at the expense of economic development. Rather, it is a vital industry—one that supports jobs, generates government revenue, is the cornerstone of tourism and economic development, and drives a creative-based economy.

Organizations like the CFPT, where our collective culture is shaped and nurtured, are closing all across the country. San Diego Repertory Theater suspended productions after 46 seasons; centers for new work like the Humana Festival in Louisville, KY, The Lark Theater in NYC, and Sundance Theater Lab in Utah have all gone dark in the last year; and Victory Gardens in Chicago has functionally ceased operations.

I urge Governor Lamont to increase the State's line item allocation to Connecticut's Flagship Producing Theatres back to its original level of \$500,000, an investment that will return sevenfold to our Connecticut economy. Without ongoing and sustaining support, our survival is uncertain at best.

The State of Connecticut can ensure that it remains one of our country's artistic engines and an indispensable home to work that will be seen on stages and screens across the world. Culture and tourism are fundamental factors in our State's success, and we hope that you will rise to meet this opportunity by fully funding our request.

Gratefully,  
Gretchen Wright  
Interim Managing Director  
Westport Country Playhouse